

The Unsolved Murder of Fay Sudow



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The last time anyone saw 42-year-old Fay Sudow alive was on December 10, 1920. Two days later her nude, mutilated body was discovered in a eucalyptus grove outside of L.A. As details about the condition of the body and the curious “double life” of the victim emerged, the case became a cause celebre across the nation – newspapers across the country carried the story. The interest was fueled as the police failed to find the murderer. Ten years later, the Los Angeles PD referred to it as “the perfect crime” and it was still of enough interest to have a front-page retrospective on the Los Angeles *Evening Express*.

St. Joseph Roots

Fay Sudow was born Pauline Levi in Russia to Julius and Emma Block Levi. The family emigrated in 1882 when their eldest daughter was four. They were part of a mass migration of Jewish people out of Eastern Europe at that time due to anti-Semitic government policies. The assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 was blamed on Jewish citizens and triggered a series of pogroms that began in Elizavetgrad (Ukraine) and spread across southern Russia and the Ukraine. In 1882 Tsar Alexander III put in place a collection of anti-Semitic laws, known collectively as the May Laws. These regulated where Jewish people could live, prohibited gentiles from issuing mortgages to Jewish people, and prohibited them from conducting business on Sundays. Members of the Russian and other Eastern European Jewish communities began to migrate in mass numbers to the United States – according to the *American Jewish Yearbook*, between 1881-1910 more than 1.5 million Jews came to America and more than 70% of those came from Russia.¹

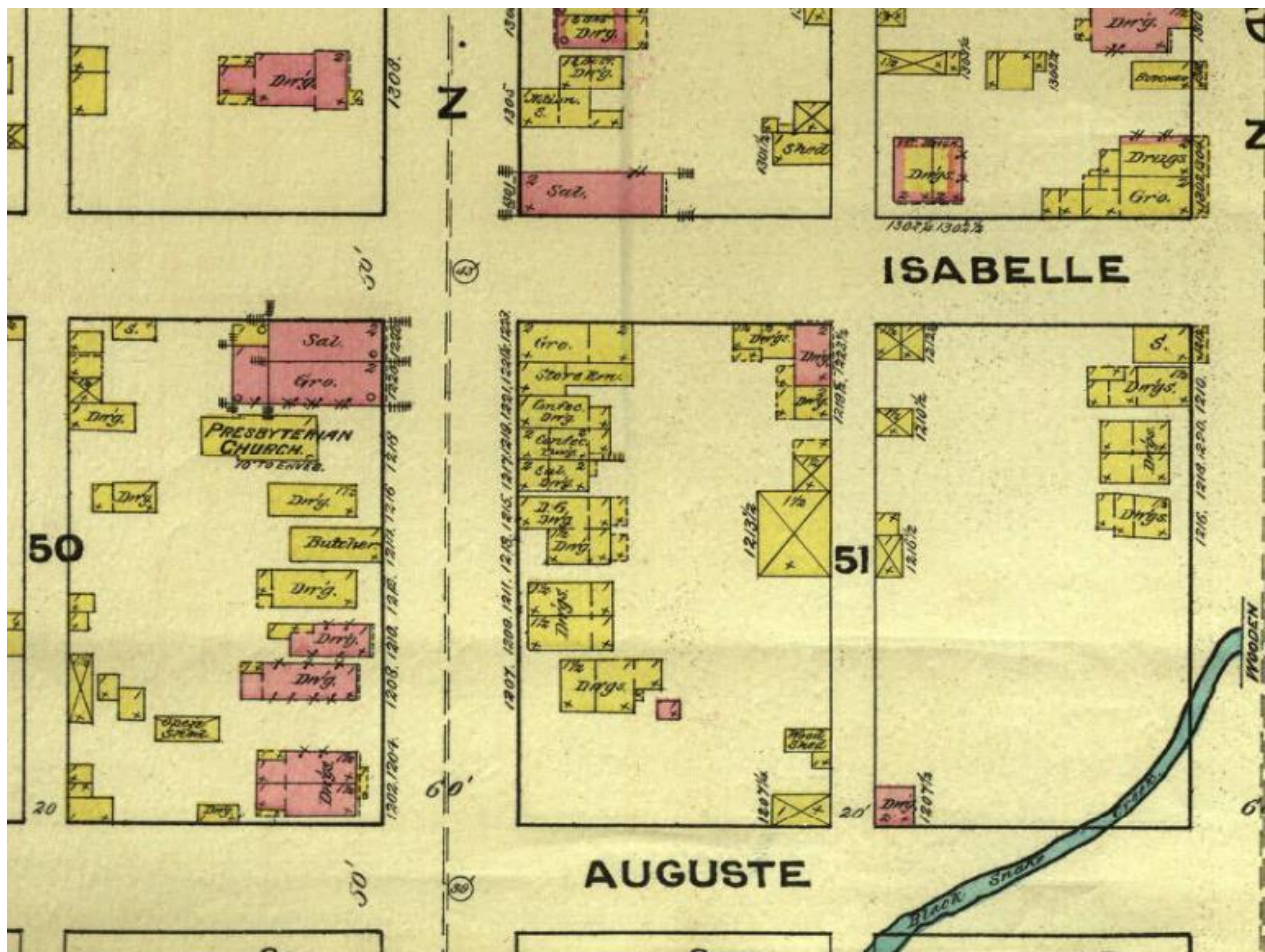


Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe

The Levis soon came to St. Joseph where Julius opened a general merchandise store at which he was moderately successful.

¹ <https://saveellisland.org/about-us/blog/item/88-jewish-immigration-to-america.html>

Julius (1852- May 1, 1932) was born in Russia/Poland as was his wife Emma Block (1858-May 6, 1923). They married in 1876 and Julius came to the U.S. in 1881 followed by Emma and Pauline the next year. Julius opened a small general merchandise store at 1213 N. 3rd Street while the family lived in the duplex at 1209/11 N. 3rd. The family had five daughters and one son. There are hints that Emma might have been quite a character. In 1905, Winnifred Skinner sued for \$1,500 alleging that “Emma Levi did seize her on a public street of St. Joseph and forcibly detained her, and stripped her of her cloak, searching her in view of many passersby greatly humiliating her.”

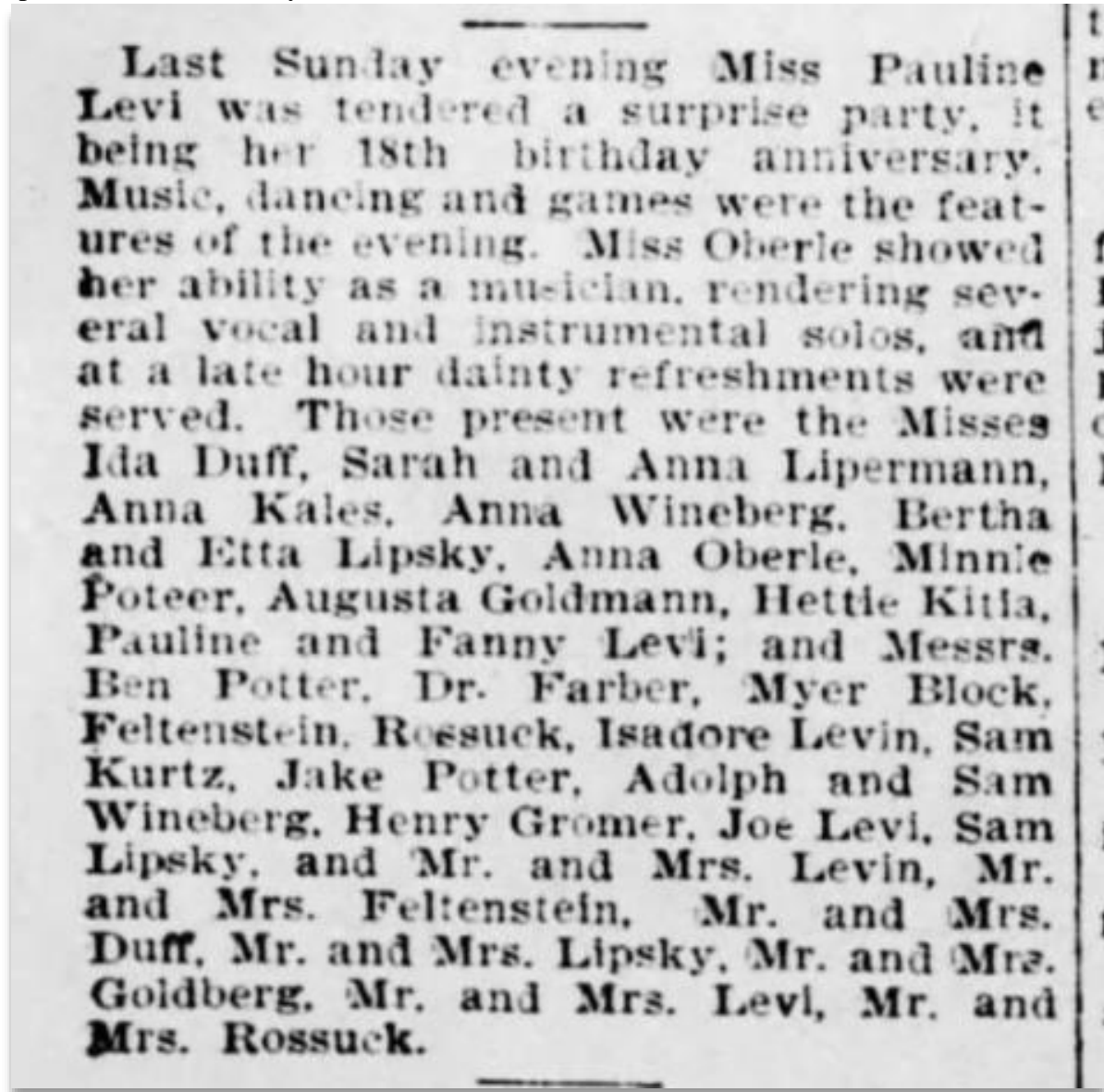


The 1883 Sanborn Fire Map showing the neighborhood where the Levis lived



The neighborhood of N. 3rd St. in 2021

Nothing in any of the reports makes mention that Fay's birth name was Pauline, but the census records list the Levi's oldest daughter as Pauline and her birthdate corresponds with what is given for Fay. There is no mention at all of a Fay Levi ever living in St. Joseph. The only mention of Pauline Levi in the St. Joseph newspapers was from the *St. Joseph Herald* in May 1896 with a report of her 18th birthday.



Last Sunday evening Miss Pauline Levi was tendered a surprise party, it being her 18th birthday anniversary. Music, dancing and games were the features of the evening. Miss Oberle showed her ability as a musician, rendering several vocal and instrumental solos, and at a late hour dainty refreshments were served. Those present were the Misses Ida Duff, Sarah and Anna Lipermann, Anna Kales, Anna Wineberg, Bertha and Etta Lipsky, Anna Oberle, Minnie Poteer, Augusta Goldmann, Hettie Kittla, Pauline and Fanny Levi; and Messrs. Ben Potter, Dr. Farber, Myer Block, Feltenstein, Rossuck, Isadore Levin, Sam Kurtz, Jake Potter, Adolph and Sam Wineberg, Henry Gromer, Joe Levi, Sam Lipsky, and Mr. and Mrs. Levin, Mr. and Mrs. Feltenstein, Mr. and Mrs. Duff, Mr. and Mrs. Lipsky, Mr. and Mrs. Goldberg, Mr. and Mrs. Levi, Mr. and Mrs. Rossuck.

Three of Fay's sisters: Sylvia, Helen, and Dora married and remained in St. Joseph. Sylvia married Abe Einbender and eventually opened the women's clothing store that bore their name. Helen married a man with the last name of Fine, and Dora married Herman Bordman (she divorced him on grounds of desertion in 1923). Sarah married Mr. Tyser and moved to Rochester, NY while their brother Joseph remained in St. Joseph.

Pre-LA

Though most of the children worked in their father's store, Pauline appears to have had bigger dreams. She is listed as working for her father in 1900, but not after that. She left St. Joseph for New York when she was relatively young. Life in the big city was not easy – she went to work in one of the garment sweat shops that were so common in the lower East Side. At the time she went there, the Lower East Side was known as “the world's largest Jewish city.” The Lower East Side had been the center of the garment trade since before 1850.² At age 23 she met Bernard Sudow who was a clerk. They had a common background, both having been born in Russian controlled Poland. At some point she seems to have dropped the name Pauline and begun to use Fay and had very little contact with her St. Joseph family.



Lower East Side, New York



² <https://www.tenement.org/explore/lower-east-side/>



Garment factory in the Lower East Side

Life in LA

In 1903 she had moved to LA and there she reconnected with Bernard. They married and in 1904 had their daughter Lucille. According to the Los Angeles Evening Express, “Almost with the birth of her child Mrs. Sudow dropped a curtain of mystery over her life – a veil which the best detectives have never been able to penetrate.”



**Bernard Sudow, Husband of the
"Woman of Mystery"**

Though initially the Sudows were poor, Fay apparently had a strong business acumen and she accumulated a significant amount of money – at the time of her murder everyone around her denied any knowledge of the source of her funds.



Los Angeles at the turn of the 20th century

Fay and Bernard lived apart and Lucille initially lived with her father in a small cottage in the southwest section of L.A. Fay visited them there, but she never stayed long. Bernard stated, “I never knew such a nature as she had. We came West to see if we could better our fortunes, but I did not have very good luck. One day she said to me that she was tired of being mixed up with a failure, ‘I’m going to get out,’ she said to me. ‘And you just watch when I am gone. I’ll show you how to make real money.’”

She seems to have gone on frequent and extend road trips, but again – those around her said that they did not know to where.

Fay became involved in the real estate market. She had designed and owned some of the most attractive and popular apartments and bungalow courts in the L.A. area. Bungalow court refers to a style of multi-family housing in which several small houses surround a small central garden. From 1910-1930 this was the primary multi-family residential type in Southern California.³ Her business was conducted through a man named William Jones, a reputable real estate man. Jones said of her, “She might have been called architect as well as builder and owner. Every detail of her ventures, every feature of architecturing, every factor of landscape effect which combined to make her Los Angeles holdings model bungalow courts, originated in her brain.”

³<https://web.archive.org/web/20140225100305/http://www.fullertonheritage.org/Resources/archstyles/bungalow.htm>



Admired "Model" Courts Designed and Erected by Fay Sudow in Los Angeles
When She Made Her Appearances as a Staid Business Woman.

During this period, her contact with her family in St. Joseph was apparently minimal – though on July 10, 1909, the *News Press* reported that her sister Sarah had gone to LA to spend two months with Fay.

Last Day of Her Life

Fay was on her way to meet with her business agent, William Jones, when she disappeared. She had an appointment to meet with him on the afternoon of December 10 at his office in the Central Building at 6th and Main. Earlier that day she had contacted George Goodrich, a plumber, and asked him to do some work at one of her bungalow courts. By chance she met Goodrich at the entrance to the Central Building and she remarked to him that she had an appointment there. Goodrich went on down the street, assuming that Fay had entered the building, but she never arrived at her appointment.



Central Building at 6th & Main

Discovery of the body

On Dec. 12, 1920, John Hudson and his wife were hiking through an area of Los Angeles known as Edendale Hills when they made the gruesome discovery of Fay's body buried under leaves and brush in the eucalyptus grove. She had been beaten to death and then a razor used to mutilate her face. The body was stripped naked. The newspapers were full of the gory details: The Los Angeles Times, Dec. 14: "W.M. Strother, member of the undertaking firm now holding the body, stated last night there is no doubt in his mind that the mutilation of the face was committed

with a knife, for the purpose of removing features by which the body could be identified. Closer inspection of the body showed that the skull was penetrated in more than a dozen places. Some of the perforations are a quarter of an inch wide and up to six inches in length. These wounds, Mr. Strother said, were inflicted with a heavy metal instrument, which may have been a hatchet. The assailant probably stood directly above his victim as she lay prone and helpless at his feet, and hacked away at her with all his might, the nature of the blows, and the different directions from which they were struck, indicated.”



Edendale Hills

Investigation

Dwight Longuevan and H.F. McCaron were assigned to the case. The pair were newly made detective sergeants.





Detectives examining the evidence in the case

Soon after the identification of the body, the detectives found and opened her safe deposit box hoping that it would provide some insight into her life, and thus into her murder. But the documents inside were not helpful, and they did not succeed in finding a will that they believe had been drafted making her 16-year-old daughter Lucille her sole heir.



Lucille Sudow

Suspects

On December 18, the *Los Angeles Evening Express* stated, “Four men, each of whom apparently is able to furnish a perfect alibi, are being investigated as slayer suspects. Police detectives frankly admit their failure to establish a motive for the crime or develop a lead unequivocally pointing to the identity of the murderer.”

Not surprisingly, early in the investigation they focused on her estranged husband Bernard. He identified the body and was the first person they questioned. He stated that he had filed for divorce in April, and that Fay had then gone away with Harold Walter Weller, a painter, whom she had met while he was doing some work in one of her apartment buildings. Sudow stated that Fay and Weller had left LA on June 16, travelling by car along the coast to Canada and had made stops in Chicago and had gone on to El Paso. She left Weller in El Paso with the car and \$75 and returned by train to LA. She then met up with Bernard again in November and the couple agreed to reconcile – he was planning to withdraw the divorce action when she was found dead.



Bernard Sudow

Sudow's story was complicated by the testimony of L.W. Phillip, a health department clerk who said that he saw the couple engaged in a fist fight on Normal Hill on December 6. Sudow denied this. A motorist later testified that on December 7 he had given the couple a ride to Edendale Hills – where her body was later found. Again, Sudow denied this.

The police tracked Weller down to Tucson, AZ and he had a firm alibi. He returned to L.A. to answer questions and stated that he and Fay had intended to marry once her divorce was final. Investigation into the relationship between Weller and Fay found that the two had shared an apartment – Fay paid the rent – and according to the landlord they fought frequently.

Double Life

As the investigation got underway, the curious life led by Fay Levi Sudow began to emerge. She was worth \$198,542 (\$2,692,229.52 in today's dollars) at the time of her death; but despite her great wealth her personal appearance tended toward the slovenly and she lived in squalid circumstances. Her business life put her in contact with many of the most respectable and wealthy people in L.A., but she spent her evenings with poverty-stricken, disreputable people.

One of the big mysteries surrounding Fay at the time of her death was her address. No one seemed to know where she lived. She spent time in cheap apartments and rooming houses, frequently in the company of various men. Her mail went to General Delivery and never in her own name: she used Helen Levi and Irene Craig.

Soon after the discovery of her body, her attorneys spoke of her saying "She was one of the most shrewd and industrious women I ever saw. She came to us about 10 years ago to secure legal aid in her business transactions. Her property was heavily mortgaged, sometimes more than it was worth. ... Taking hold of property like a shoe-string. Mrs. Sudow would pull it through and make something of it. I believe her income totaled about \$2,400 (\$32,500 in 2021 dollars) a month

from a principal of \$100,000. A few years ago we learned that she was living in a dingy room on South Figueroa street. It was shabbily furnished with just a cot and bare furnishings. She was known to be in this place only a few hours of the night. I don't believe she carried more than 50 cents in her pocket at any one time. Shabbily dressed, she acted like a pauper and seemed to want people to know her as a pauper."

As the investigation progressed, it became clear that Fay preferred to spend her evenings in the bars and dance halls in some of the rougher parts of LA, often in the company of the "gray haired man." A paper from Hinton, West Virginia reported, "By day the woman dressed as other business women dress, quietly and conservatively. By night she adorned herself in costly gowns and jewels and then launched into a night life off wild debauch, accompanied by men and women with whom she had no contact during the day."

This mysterious double life led police to believe that she was involved in the narcotics trade.

Theories

Because the crime was never solved, we don't know why Fay was killed. The L.A. police department always thought that she was involved in drug trafficking in some way and that led to her murder. This theory began with the testimony of Irene Berger, the wife a petty officer in the navy, who confessed to being a narcotics user. She claimed that in the period between her disappearance on December 10 and the discovery of the body, Fay had been held prisoner by a gang of narcotic dealers. She was taken to an isolated place in Griffith Park by three members of the gang who beat her to death believing her to be a police informant. The police were not convinced by the story, but they investigated it for several days.

A 74-year-old Pasadena gardener named L.D. Tipton came forward with a salacious tale: He stated that Fay had appeared at his door about three weeks before her death telling him that she was being pursued by a band of criminals. She begged him to let her sleep on a pile of rags in his garage. She refused to tell him more details and he would not permit her to sleep in his garage, so she left.

The press began to speculate that she used her real estate dealings as a front for drug smuggling or rum running (this is the height of prohibition).

As the investigation progressed and got nowhere, "stories, unverified, had come from St. Joseph, MO, Mrs. Sudow's girlhood home. They whispered of a millionaire banker of Kansas City who had been blackmailed over a period of many years. The man was questioned. He admitted that he knew the slain woman in years gone by, but he denied, in detail, the whispers which linked his name with hers."

Response in St. Joseph

The *News Press* first reported the story on December 20. Despite her local connections, the details in the story were less than precise. It reported that Fay and Bernard had married here and that they lived here for several years before moving west – there is nothing in the City Directories or the newspapers of the time to support that. "Her parents said they may send some one to Los Angeles to investigate the murder. A. Einbender, a brother-in-law of the murdered woman, sent a telegram to the chief of police at Los Angeles Sunday night but had received no reply." Einbender was married to Fay's younger sister Sylvia.

PROBABLY MURDEKED.

Mutilated Body of Mrs. Fay Sudow Is Found in Los Angeles—Brother-in-Law Goes to Investigate.

Mr. and Mrs. Julius Levi, 1200 North Third street, have been notified that the body of their daughter, Mrs. Fay Sudow, was found in a mutilated condition near Los Angeles, where she lived, Dec. 12. According to the word, she apparently had been murdered. Her parents say she was at the time of her death worth several hundred thousand dollars made in oil speculations.

Abe Einbender, 1001 North Tenth street, brother-in-law of Mrs. Sudow, will leave tomorrow for Los Angeles to investigate Mrs. Sudow's death. Mrs. Einbender was a sister of Mrs. Sudow.

The *News Press* of the same date stated that Abe Einbender intended to travel to Los Angeles on December 21 to investigate the death.

The St. Joseph newspapers were not slow to hone in on the salacious elements of the story. On January 7 the *News Press* ran a story: "Los Angeles Dispatches Say Mrs. Fay Sudow was Victim of a Gang of Narcotic Peddlers. According to a dispatch from Los Angeles, Mrs. Fay Sudow... was murdered by a gang of narcotic peddlers operating along the Pacific Coast. Mrs. Sudow's nude and mutilated body was found in the hills near Los Angeles. . . The reason for the killing is not known. Mrs. Sudow is spoken of as 'the wealthy woman of mystery.'"

MURDER OF ST. JOSEPH WOMAN

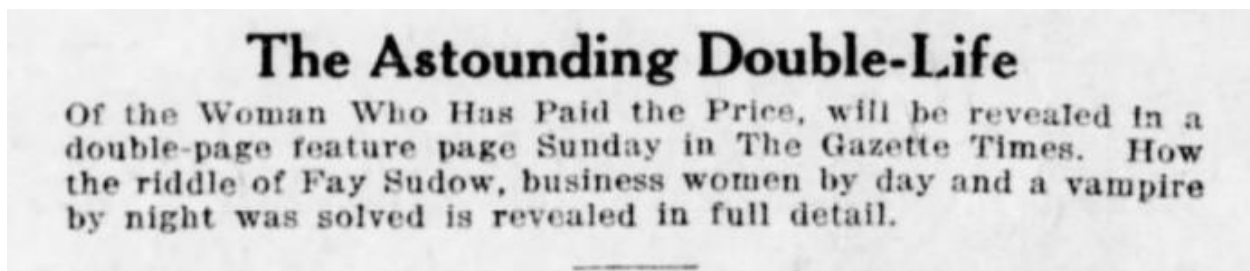
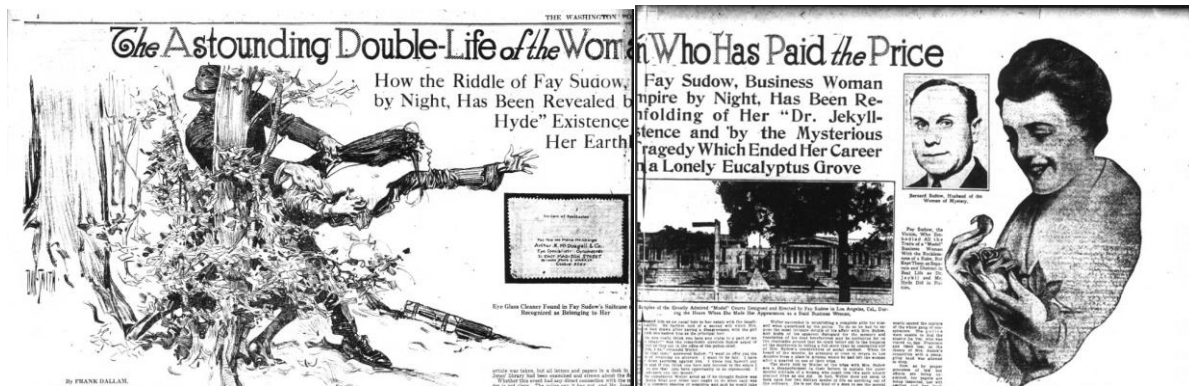
Los Angeles Dispatches Say Mrs. Fay Sudow Was Victim of a Gang of Narcotic Peddlers.

According to a dispatch from Los Angeles, Mrs. Fay Sudow, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Julius Levi, 1309 North Third street, was murdered by a gang of narcotic peddlers operating along the Pacific Coast. Mrs. Sudow's nude and mutilated body was found in the hills near Los Angeles last December.

Mrs. Irene Berger, wife of a petty officer of the navy, has given the police the name of the man who killed Mrs. Sudow, it is understood. The reason for the killing is not known. Mrs. Sudow is spoken of as "the wealthy woman of mystery." Word of her death was not received directly by her parents, but it came through press dispatches last month.

National Story

The salacious and mysterious elements to the story made this a national sensation. This was fueled by a story that was published in several newspapers: "The Astounding Double-Life of the Woman..." by Frank Dallam. Filled with intriguing illustrations and language reminiscent of the popular crime novels of the era, it purported to tell the story of her "Jekyll and Hyde" existence. It told the basic outlines of the case as it was known in January 1921 but was full of exaggerations – essentially doubled her worth.



Aftermath

Fay was buried at Home of Peace Memorial Park in Los Angeles – the oldest Jewish cemetery in the Los Angeles area.



Home of Peace Memorial Park

One of the big issues to be resolved was where would Lucille live? At the time of the murder, she was in boarding school – her mother seemed to work hard to keep her daughter separate from her life. Bernard indicated that he would seek custody, but early reports thought that

he would not have much success. Some thought that she would be sent to live with the Levis in St. Joseph. In the end, based on Los Angeles City Directories, it appears that she did go live with Bernard. She seems to have remained in LA her entire life, marrying someone named Desmond and dying in 1993.

Bernard remained in Los Angeles. He died on Dec. 22, 1957, never having remarried. He was buried at Hollywood Memorial Park Cemetery, now known as Hollywood Forever Cemetery.



Hollywood Forever Cemetery

Following Fay's murder, her family in St. Joseph continued on with their lives. Her mother Emma died in 1923 as a result of a diabetic coma. Julius, her father, died in St. Joseph in 1932 – his obituary made no mention of Fay. Sylvia Einbender's husband Abraham, operated a successful St. Joseph women's clothing store,⁴ died in 1959⁵ and Sylvia continued to run the business until her death in 1989. Her obituary also does not mention Fay. Dora Bordman died in 1971 in Hollywood. Sarah Tyser died in 1977 in Houston, TX after living in St. Joseph with Sylvia for many years. Joseph remained in St. Joseph for most of his life, he died in 1967. The St. Joseph part of the family are buried at Shaare Sholem Cemetery.

⁴ He started with a grocery store at 10th and Corby in 1919 following his return from WWI, it was Sylvia who added dresses to the line. The store at that time was located near Western Tablet factory and she thought that the women working there would be good customers.

⁵ He died unexpectedly in Paris enroute to Israel for the triennial convention of Bnai Brith.



One of the very few photos of Fay known to exist

After the 10-year anniversary in 1930, the murder dropped out of public eye and remains unsolved.



Headline of the story marking the 10-year anniversary of the murder

Sources

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